

Hamas to use shari'a as governing basis; churches urge peace: Movement might moderate positions temporarily

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Hamas intends to apply Islamic law, or *shari'a*, as the basis for running the Palestinian Authority after its landslide win in the late January elections for the legislature, officials from the group said. But they added that people would not be forced to comply with shari'a.

The victory of the militant group in the elections has stirred concerns by more liberal Palestinians that the Islamist group might enforce its views after defeating Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas's secular Fatah movement.

Nevertheless, Anglican bishop Riah Abu El-Assal joined 12 other Christian leaders in Jerusalem in a January 31 statement congratulating the Palestinian people "for their democratic performance in the recent parliamentary elections." The group, which includes patriarchs and heads of church bodies, also prayed for "all those who will govern in this difficult period" that they may be committed to "justice and peace."

Sheik Mohammed Abu Teir, who was second on the list of Hamas candidates, has said that Hamas wants shari'a to be applied to more facets of life in the Palestinian Authority; he would, for example, seek to separate boys and girls at schools and introduce a more Islamic curriculum.

"Why do we have immorality in the West?" Abu Teir said in comments to reporters. "Isn't it because of coeducation? Our society is conservative, and when we separate, we bring these children up in such a way that we keep our society clean. The highest levels of sexual perversion are found in the West."

Hamas, sworn to Israel's destruction, seeks to establish a strict Islamic state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and on the ruins of Israel.

The Lutheran World Federation has urged Hamas to commit itself to dialogue and to promoting peace efforts with Israel. "For the sake of the Palestinian people and the future state of Palestine, Hamas must transform itself in its policies and approaches concerning the state of Israel, and commit itself to dialogue and negotiations," said LWF general secretary Ishmael Noko on January 31.

In the parliamentary elections January 25, Hamas won 76 out of 132 seats, leaving the former ruling party, Fatah, with 43.

The Holy Land's Lutheran bishop Munib Younan urged Christians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip not to panic over Hamas's victory, but it was evident that his concerns arose because of the already diminishing Arab Christian population in Palestine.

Hamas leaders have indicated that the movement might moderate its positions temporarily and set up a government that will not alienate Palestinians who are more liberal or Western nations, such as the U.S., which provide the Palestinian Authority with substantial aid.

Some Hamas officials said they would not prevent men and women from mixing, nor would they ban alcohol. "We are making efforts so that the shari'a will be the source of legislation, but in order to implement Islamic rule, this needs a state," said Mahmoud Ramahi, a Hamas official who won a seat in the new legislature. -

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